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### Crafting Believable Characters by Choosing the Right Words

Francine Prose has a way of renewing a writer's passion for the possibilities inherent in words. In Reading Like a Writer, Francine Prose suggests that "all the elements of good writing depend on the writer's skill in choosing one word instead of another," reminding us of the "countless large and small deliberations" (16) the words on the page represent. We do not have to read closely to appreciate the cumulative effect of these small choices, but the close reader will be rewarded with deep insight into the writer's craft. Han Nolan's Dancing on the Edge achieves an impressive balance between subjective, poetic impressionism and grounded realism. We receive the world through a single character's lens, a lens that reflects a growing, questioning, sometimes unreliable point of view. Miracle herself asks, "How should I know what's real?" (224). Yet, at the same time, the objective reality of the world surrounding this character seems undeniable, in large part due to the believable, well-rounded characters who populate it. In Prose's discussion of character, she suggests that "even the most seemingly disparate writers turn out to share certain skills in common: for example, the ability to create a minor character with just a few quick strokes" (120). To divine the craft underlying the solid impressions Nolan creates, I have chosen to examine the small but significant choices she makes in painting her minor characters.

While Miracle's interpretation of events cannot always be trusted, her descriptions of characters reveal objective information to the reader that allows us to make our own judgments.

In describing her dance teacher, Susan, Miracle states, “Up close I could see she didn’t wear makeup or shave under her arms, and she sat on the linoleum floor to talk to us with her legs spread out and her feet pointing and flexing, pointing and flexing” (49). She does not draw conclusions from these observations, but the reader can infer from the lack of make-up and unshaven armpits that Susan is serious, at least about dance, and somewhat bohemian. The repetition of “pointing and flexing” suggests a restlessness, a desire to return to work and to movement. We can also gather information about Susan from Miracle’s reactions to her. The dance teacher achieves what no one else can, leading Miracle to part with Dane’s robe. “For Susan, I wore just the sash tied around my waist. She said I looked cool” (65). Miracle wants to be like Susan, and Susan’s kind actions suggest that she makes a positive role model. While Susan has a small role to play in the story, she allows Nolan to provide a wealth of information about Miracle, about what she responds to and what she would like to become. The most minor characters, when skillfully drawn, support and inform the central story.

In the case of Dane, the objective information conveyed by Miracle overshadows her impressions. When Miracle lovingly describes the “warm smells of cigarettes, wine, and musty old books – Dane’s smell” (22), the reader can draw a different conclusion from this potpourri of vice and mustiness. Miracle says of Dane, “To look at him you wouldn’t think my daddy ever did a lick of work, always in that robe and slippers with the mashed-down heels, but he was a writer, a prodigy” (5). A prodigy though he may be, we later learn that Dane has been frustrated in his writing and has not published anything new in some time. While Miracle cheerfully gives him the benefit of the doubt in every situation, everything in his demeanor screams depression and contempt for his lot. By the time Aunt Casey describes Miracle’s parents as “two selfish egos . . . spoiled babies. Both” needing “someone to take care of them” (213), we, along with

Miracle, have seen enough of Dane's actions to agree with Aunt Casey's assessment.

When we otherwise might question Miracle's point of view, Nolan enlists other characters to support or counter Miracle's impressions. Even in a first person narrative, the writer can access other points of view through dialogue or by having the narrator relate another character's reaction to something. In her analysis of The Marquise of O—, Prose suggests that the "minor characters are our stand-ins, expressing the sensible reservations that any rational person might have" (119). In a similar way, Nolan needs characters outside of Miracle to allow the reader to see or suspect what Miracle does not. When Aunt Casey brings up Dane's disappearance, Miracle asks, "You mean when he melted?" Aunt Casey answers, "Yeah, okay" (80). These two words of dialogue convey the attitude of a dubious person who agrees with something she does not believe in order to move the conversation forward. In the case of Eugene Wadell, Casey affirms Miracle's assessment by saying, "He never smiles, he leers, did you notice? He leers at you like he's the Big Bad Wolf come to eat Granny and her Little Red Riding Hood" (93). That Casey shares an unfavorable opinion of Eugene builds on the image of him that Miracle has already expressed, giving the reader a clue as to how Nolan would have us see Eugene. When Uncle Toole says of Emmaline, "That's a black woman he's got out there with him" (96), Nolan reveals both an objective fact about Emmaline and Uncle Toole's prejudice. Further, when we receive this information from him, we realize that it did not occur to Miracle to mention Emmaline's race, and we learn something more about her character. This highlights another point from Prose, the importance of "the space *between* words, in what has been left out" (19).

While it may impact the casual reader on a purely subconscious level, Nolan makes careful choices in her presentation of minor characters that reflect on the novel's themes and inform our interpretation of the central story. While these characters serve the plot, they work double duty,

feeding Nolan's thematic argument, serving as struts or underpinnings to Miracle's arc. In the case of Juleen Presque, a minor character serves as a major catalyst to Miracle's journey. Her impact on the story is out of proportion with the number of words devoted to her. In our first impression of Juleen, Miracle describes a frozen moment, revealing the deep impact Juleen has on her: "Then, after I'd climbed on Etain, before I pedaled away, I saw a girl standing under a tree just beyond the crowd. She was watching me, and it made something inside me squeeze up tight. She reminded me of the wig heads watching me at home" (132). Again, other characters contribute to our picture of Juleen, assuring us that her strangeness is not all in Miracle's head: "They called her the brain and said she was stranger than snake's feet" (141). In one long paragraph, Nolan uses Juleen to bookend Miracle's growing fear and dread. After a description of the "cold, fearful feeling" Juleen gives her, Miracles says:

That dark fear-shadow that had been with me for so long no longer hovered over and around me but had moved inside me, had taken over my whole insides so that I feared everything . . . Most of all, I was afraid that there was someone pushing me, or drawing me forward . . . closer to the edge of that dangerous place. Juleen Presque knew this. She was waiting for me to fall off that edge. (141)

We have already associated Juleen with a snake. In this long paragraph, Juleen becomes deeply associated with the "fear-shadow" inside of Miracle, who responds to her with physical revulsion. In following lines, Nolan uses physical language to capture how deeply Juleen's advocacy of the truth threatens Miracle: "I sucked in my breath and choked on the quick draw of air. 'I'm sick, go away,' I said, coughing, pressing against the door. / Juleen pushed it back and stepped inside" (147). Miracle's apparent weakness in the face of the aggressive Juleen builds until she finds herself "up against the kitchen wall" (149). And yet, with a couple of quick

strokes, Juleen's admiration for Miracle's bad behavior in the past school year and her earnest offer of a book of "true" (150) poetry, Nolan conveys to the reader what Miracle cannot yet know, that Juleen has Miracle's best interests at heart and that the journey she propels her on will be a frightening but positive one.

Emmaline and Eugene could on the surface appear to merely be plot devices or comic characters. They are both of these, but Nolan also uses them to reflect the characters of Miracle's grandparents. In Eugene, Miracle confronts the negative traits she will eventually come to acknowledge in Gigi, and from Emmaline, she senses the kind of home she might make with her grandfather: "I pictured her living in a broom-swept house, with everything in its proper place and all her furniture stuffed fat with feathers. I pictured her singing while she cooked, the rich-smelling sauces and gravies bubbling and dancing merrily in their pots" (114). This bountiful image reflects well on Granddaddy Opal. But in Nolan's hands, these minor players inform more than the other characters. Nolan uses them to create an even deeper resonance with the themes brought up by Miracle's struggle.

Miracle's journey is one of acting out and expressing that which has been hidden. As Dr. DeAngelis says, "It's a funny thing about children. The very thing adults try so hard to keep secret is the very thing they'll act out" (198). When she confronts her true story, Miracle realizes that she, too, has participated in keeping secrets: "I knew how it was. I had always known. I had always known!" (217). Miracle's struggle comes to hinge upon her willingness to confront these truths and to express them to Gigi. Eugene and Emmaline represent two sides of a coin when it comes to expression. Emmaline is so loud it can be uncomfortable to be in her presence. Miracle says, "It was better if you could listen to her from another room instead of being right there with her" (94). Prompted by Emmaline's singing, Miracle says, "for the first time I understood what

Susan had always told me. She said I needed to feel the music, feel the pulse inside me, speak it with my body” (100). Emmaline’s talent for expression inspires Miracle to reveal her true self at the risk of upsetting Gigi. This character trait takes on a deeper significance when Casey enlists Emmaline in sharing secrets: “she and Aunt Casey went out into the hallway to whisper, but Miss Emmaline wasn’t good at whispering” (159). Even on the physical level, Emmaline brings out the truth in Miracle, who says, “I didn’t know how cold my hand was until she took it and massaged it. I didn’t know the joints ached” (109).

Eugene and Emmaline are opposites, both in their relationships and their attitudes. Where Emmaline is loud, Eugene is silent: “He nodded and opened his mouth as if he were saying ‘Ah,’ but no sound came out” (92). When he speaks, it is only to parrot Gigi: “‘That’s right,’ he said. ‘You wear your purple. It will help bring you in touch with the spirit world.’ He stopped Dane’s Mozart tape and nodded some more in the uncomfortable silence he created” (92). In the hospital, Eugene suggests, “ ‘if we could just visualize healing . . .’ Mr. Wadell’s voice trailed off and he looked around for Gigi. / ‘Prayer, you mean,’ said Miss Emmaline.’ / ‘Uh—’ Mr. Wadell pulled open his can of Sprite and took a sip” (110). In the struggle for the reader’s sympathies, Nolan sets Eugene up to fail, slowly paving the way for Miracle’s final confrontation with Gigi. Miracle has “a sneaking suspicion that” Eugene “lived with his ninety-year-old mama who still helped him get dressed every morning. He always wore his pants belted way up over his jiggly waist and his shirt looked like his mama tucked him in real good every day before he stepped out the door” (113). In his most disturbing capacity, Eugene invokes an image reminiscent of the infantilized Dane, of what Dane would have become had he not run away.

Nolan derives the greatest impact from even her smallest characters. This speaks to the

integrity of her work. The skillful writer can create a minor character, as Prose says, with “just a few quick strokes,” but the craft need not stop there. Nolan shows that even a minor character can inform the major questions of a novel and resonate beyond the small part he plays in the plot. Even as they carry this weight, Nolan’s most quirky and resonant characters take nothing away from her heroin. Rather than blurring the focus, they help us to understand Miracle more clearly. I want to take this away from my study of Nolan: to revel in creating eccentric and vibrant characters but only so far as they illuminate the main character and her quest.

Works Cited

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